

# South Africa's Most Notorious Criminals in History.

Crime in South Africa is a well-known hot topic of discussion. South Africa is currently rated as one of the most dangerous places to visit but for us living here it is part of life. South Africa has always had its fair share of criminal activities as elsewhere in the world. This article will have a look at some of South-Africa's most notorious criminals, what they did and what happened to them.

## Racketeers, Bank Robbers, Hit-Men, Gangs, Death Squads, Human Trafficking, Murderers, Serial Killers and Spy's.

South-Africa has a rich criminal past and in this weekly series we will be looking at the most prominent of them. Some of which you might have never heard of.

Of All crimes in South-Africa the oldest by far is probably that of Human Trafficking. Although called "Slavery" at the time (and lawful), all the slaves that came from and through South Africa's ports was nothing less than Human Trafficking. Even with the abolishment of slavery on 1 December 1834 South Africa is still, to this day, a hotbed for human trafficking due to the large poverty rate that makes its citizens (and especially the children) easy targets.

The first reported case of a serial killer in South Africa was the case of Pierre Basson.

### Pierre Corneille Faculys Basson - "The Insurance Killer"

Pierre Basson was born in 1880 in Claremont, Cape Town, South Africa. Physically, Basson was quite a normal boy. He had dark hair, deep-set brown eyes and was of average height and build. But under his plain exterior he had an evil hiding inside and was guilty of cruel acts from an early age. When he was 12, he hit a boy with a knife and among other things, he enjoyed catching and killing birds. He also amputated cats and laughed while they squirmed suffered from pain. In his teens, Basson earned himself a reputation as a petty thief and when Basson's father died suddenly after a short illness, Pierre, who was then about 18 years of age, showed little or no concern. However, the death of his father seems to have been a turning point for Pierre.

Pierre's scheme involved money lending. For his service, he charged the normal rate of interest and insisted that the lender take out a life insurance policy to cover the 'unexpected', naming himself as beneficiary. There was nothing unusual in this: it was normal business practice. The only difference between Pierre's operation and that of other moneylenders was that Pierre intended to make certain he collected the insurance money.

His killing spree began with his first victim, his 17 year old brother Jasper whom he insured for £3, 500. He paid the first year's premiums and then invited him on a fishing trip to Gordon's Bay. He drowned his brother on 4 February 1903. Jasper's body was never found and the insurance company initially did not want to pay the policy until they were ordered by a court to do so. Eventually, after a court battle, the claim was paid out and Pierre bought a house called The Arums in Heatherton Road, Claremont, Cape Town.



Between 1902 and 1905, Basson conceived a number of ingenious schemes designed to trick people out of their money. Then, towards the end of 1905, he met a German farmer named Wilhelm Schaefer. When the police eventually uncovered the grave of his last victim, Wilhelm Schaefer, Basson was linked to the murder and when the police arrived at his house to arrest him, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

In total, Basson killed 9 people for insurance money earning him the nickname of "The Insurance Killer".

He never killed in anger but only after an intelligent and well strategized plan. His cunning crimes were inspired by greed and execution was done very meticulous.

## George St Leger Gordon Lennox – “Scotty Smith” *Robin Hood of the Kalahari*

George St Leger Lennox (1845–1919) born into a noble Scottish family. He was a South African bandit known as South Africa's Robin Hood, a well-known as a cattle thief, diamond smuggler and friend of the poor.

By Scotty's own account he was not willing to marry the girl that his father had chosen for him in Scotland, and therefore did not receive his inheritance. George, or Scotty as he was known, trained as a Veterinarian, before being shipped to the colonies.

Scotty arrived in South Africa in 1877 to join the Mounted Police. It is not known exactly when his military career ended, or when he got his nickname "Scotty Smith", although he claimed that he took the papers of a fallen comrade by that name to escape military life at some point. After his early attempts at a military lifestyle Scotty's life took a more exciting turn.

In South Africa he got involved in gun-running, general theft, elephant hunting and other hunting activities in Botswana. He was also involved in legal and illegal diamond buying in the diamond fields, horse theft and highway robberies. He was caught and sentenced several times for these crimes, and always managed to escape somehow. He claimed that no prison cell could hold him.

Scotty Smith was a genius when it came to fooling people into believing that he was someone else by changing his character but he never actually used any disguise. It is said that one police detective who had arrested Scotty, ended up being the captive, and "Sergeant Scotty" handed him over to the police in Kimberley, claiming that the captive (who was the policeman) was Scotty Smith. After being jailed, the man had a difficult time in convincing the authorities that Scotty Smith had played a trick on them.

Many times, living up to his nickname of Robin Hood of the Kalahari, he robbed the rich to give to the poor. A farmer once met Scotty but did not recognise whom he was. The farmer related to Scotty that he would like to capture Scotty Smith and claim the large reward at the Kenhardt police station. Scotty then immediately identified himself and told the now hesitant farmer to take him to Kenhardt Police station at gunpoint, where the reluctant farmer received the reward. However, the farmer did not have to feel remorse for very long, because early that evening, Scotty broke out of jail again.

In 1892 Scotty Smith met 19-year-old Miss van Niekerk and married. Together they raised a family of two sons and five daughters. After a short time in the Military, Scotty finally left them to do his own thing. After a long career involved in horse and cattle stealing, he was involved in numerous illegal diamond operations again in the wider Kimberley area.

A merchant, Thomas Welford and his partner Gustav Herman and Gustav's brother Max, approached Scotty Smith to help them steal a packet of diamonds from a Sam Kemp but who was apparently an illegal runner for a man known as Sam Weil. The plan was as follows; the group would ambush Sam Kemp and steal the diamonds. If he resisted, they would shoot him.

The plan was carried out, Sam Kemp resisted and was shot and the diamonds were stolen. Kemp recovered though, and rode back to Kimberley to report the theft at the police station. Police officers soon uncovered the whole plan and arrested Scotty and the others. This time, Scotty did not escape. He was sentenced to four years imprisonment and 25 lashes in the Boshof circuit court. He never received the lashes though and after a year, his sentence was dropped and he was once again free.



During his imprisonment in Bloemfontein, it is claimed that Scotty Smith was permitted to visit the town bar daily. One day, he apparently came across a parade including the Official State President's coach, after successfully masquerading as the president, he took a ride in high style, before returning to prison later on.

After his year in jail, Scotty left for a rural area, and from the early 1880s he was a bandit in the area of the Goshen and Stellaland Republics. He stayed in that area until shortly before the Anglo-Boer War.

Scotty died a respected elderly townsman of Upington during the 1919 flu epidemic. He is buried in the Upington cemetery. The grave is protected by an iron trellis, on his grave stone is written "Never will his memory fade - Jessie".



Scotty Smith with his wife and family—a photograph taken in Upington a few years before his death

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